

La procesión del Encuentro

The Procession of the Meeting

The following account took place on the 5th of April of 2015 when I was in my last year of undergraduate studies in Social Anthropology at the University of the Basque Country. I was enrolled in a Visual Anthropology course and submitted this essay as my final project. My account is at once that of an undergraduate student, a director and a cameraperson.

Introduction:

Tajahuerce is the name of a town found deep within Spain and the province of Soria. According to the 2015 census, the town is home to no more than 30 people; a rural village where locals are aging and largely Christian. Both of my mother's parents were residents, so I often summered there.

Easter is highly regarded in Tajahuerce and the priest give mass on Sunday to many towns in the surrounding area. In the year 2015 I was lucky enough to be there with my grandmother, and decided to accompany her while recording a video for my Visual Anthropology course. The four-minute-long short captures our journey: starting from when we left home, continuing until we went to church and attended the procession, and finishing with our return. It is these four minutes which I intend to deconstruct, describe and analyze in the presented paper.

Methodology:

The material in the video was recorded with a single compact photographic camera in a 4:3 aspect ratio. I carried it the whole length of the procession, directing and focusing on all that I felt was relevant. The sound was also recorded with the camera, and because of the strong wind that day, the sound is at times obscured. As explained before, I intended to record the whole process, starting from my house, meeting different people who were attending to the mass, and returning. I wanted to grasp the randomness of daily life- the natural- having little influence over my camera, and recording the encounters between my grandma and the other

local people. Although I had many doubts about the moral and ethical aspects of my work, I decided not to disclose my recording and to video the whole process without the knowledge of the people who attended the procession. I was not given any permission to carry out the video because I simply did not ask for it¹. My grandma was my only accomplice and she could not really comprehend what I was doing.

I was holding my grandma's hand during one part, as she was using me as her cane, and had the camera in the other hand. That of course, affected the way I was recording: my grandma is a strong 86 years old woman who has a clumsy walk, so that shaped the way the footage was recorded with my left hand. I was holding my camera right on my belly, just in the right place to be unnoticed.

The whole process started at 10:25 AM when both my grandma and I left home, and since then I continued recording, with small pauses in between, until the end of the procession, around 11:30 AM. It is important to highlight the fact that the religious act was completely new for me, so I was not sure what to expect, and therefore, the way I recorded was improvised. There were times in which, as a cameraperson, I did not know what I should be focusing on, and that is noticeable at some points in the video, as I am turning my camera from left to right in a constant movement.

The audio used for the short has been taken from diverse sources. Although they are mainly taken from the video itself, some are also added from a former interview that I conducted with my grandma. Some audio was also adapted from my previous works.

Objective:

The main objective was to better grasp a Christian tradition which might not last indefinitely; the idea of the anthropologist as a hero, trying to rescue remains, was common throughout my work. The images show a swathe of elderly people from whom few will remain in 10 years. My grandma did not even expect that the procession would be happening that year. I then used the excuse of my work to understand an ancient tradition which is still alive in the twenty-first

¹ I need to make a point in saying that I know everyone in the town, so carrying a hidden camera is not as invasive as it might seem.

century, but may not be soon. This reminds of Alfred Cort Haddon's purpose in journeying to the Torres Strait², where he dedicated himself to recording not-yet-extinct cultures.

On the other hand, as I have said before, varied conditions led me to record the images that I did. I felt shyness and fear, as I was trying to be unnoticed as an observer, but also a bit of bravery too. I was holding my grandma's hand, which made me as clumsy as her.

Content:

This procession at Easter is called the Procession of the Meeting; the union between a resurrected Christ and the Virgin Mary. Women comfort Mary, covered by a black cape, crying over the death of her son, while men accompany Christ. Women walk from one side of the church, whereas men go from the other, and they both join at the back of the church. Christ greets his mother, as the man who holds him takes him down from the cross, bowing three times. As it follows, an auction takes place to see who would be fortunate enough to keep Mary's black cape for the following year until the next procession will be held. Fifty euros, an equivalent of forty pounds, was paid when the video was recorded.

There were around twenty people participating in the procession: fifteen women and five men. Two of the men had an important role: one held Christ, and the other was in charge of conducting the auction. As presented, the hope of the tradition's survival is quite low.

Just as the Lumière brothers intended to grasp the famous arrival of the train³, I too structured my short so that the beginning would be when people approached the junction behind the church (this is the scene when the train arrives to the station in Lumière's short); then the procession (people leaving the train); and lastly the return to the church (when people go into the train). As it happened after World War I, when the static images took a second plane and fragmentation and scene cuts started being used on images, my film decries a fragmented reality. Men are recorded from one side and women from the other, taken in different footage. It is also significant that even though I wanted to record the procession of the Meeting, the Virgin Mary and Christ are the figures which are the most hidden and least seen.

² *The Recordings of the Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to Torres Straits* (1898).

³ *L'Arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat* (1895).

If I had videoed like David McDougall, (Grimshaw, A., Papastergiadis, N., & MacDougall, D, 1995),⁴ and taken the camera every day to the same place with the same people, I would not have been likely to worry about the way the camera would affect the behavior of the people being recorded; but this was not the case. Like Jean Rouché's work in Niger, I have recorded what is improvised, what is live, without a script and through my perspective. The difference between him and me is that he was showing the camera; I was hiding it. At the same time, my short can also be compared to Dziga Vértov's work with the cine-eye⁵. The sound is unreliable in both cases; a comment on human perception that is vulnerable and confused. The distance between the camera and the scenes was that of a person who is observing the procession for the first time: not too close or involved with the act. The walking and recorded images' movement evokes the viewer as present, inviting her or him to be part of the procession. Another likeminded work is Artavazd Peleshyan's⁶, where Peleshyan's timid and curious vision bears similarities to mine.

I have to confess that at the moment of recording, I felt as if I would be appropriating of all the things that I filmed, so I did not feel entirely legitimated to do it. Shyness and fear were the strongest feelings that I had at that moment. I did not want anyone to notice that I was filming, in fear of their reaction. I was in THEIR space, so I had to respect it as much as possible. I kept this question in mind: *Is the story that I wanted to recount mine or does it belong to the people being recorded?*

The short available to watch in: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BbPyPV2breg>

⁴ Grimshaw, A., Papastergiadis, N., & MacDougall, D. (1995). *Conversations with Anthropological Film-makers, David MacDougall*. Prickly Pear Press.

⁵ WE: Variant of a Manifesto (1919).

⁶ *The End* (1994).